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## Rupert Cornwell: At last, the warmongers are prepared to face the facts and admit they were wrong

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It has taken more than three years, tens of thousands of Iraqi and American lives, and \$200bn (£115bn) of treasure - all to achieve a chaos verging on open civil war. But, finally, the neo-conservatives who sold the United States on this disastrous war are starting to utter three small words. We were wrong.

The second thoughts have spread across the conservative spectrum, from William Buckley, venerable editor of The National Review to Andrew Sullivan, once editor of the New Republic, now an influential commentator and blogmeister. The patrician conservative columnist George Will was gently sceptical from the outset. He now glumly concludes that all three members of the original "axis of evil" - not only Iran and North Korea but also Iraq - "are more dangerous than when that term was coined in 2002".

Neither Mr Buckley nor Mr Sullivan concedes that the decision to topple Saddam was intrinsically wrong. But "the challenge required more than [President Bush's] deployable resources," the former sadly recognises. "The American objective in Iraq has failed."

For Mr Sullivan, today's mess is above all a testament to American overconfidence and false assumptions, born of arrogance and naïveté. But he too asserts, in a column in Time magazine this week, that all may not be lost.

Of all the critiques however, the most profound is that of Francis Fukuyama, in his forthcoming book, America at the Crossroads. Its subtitle is "Democracy, Power and the Neo-Conservative Legacy" - and that legacy, Mr Fukuyama argues, is fatally poisoned.

This is no ordinary thesis, but apostasy on a grand scale. Mr Fukuyama, after all, was the most prominent intellectual who signed the 1997 "Project for the New American Century", the founding manifesto of neo-conservatism drawn up by William Kristol, editor of the Weekly Standard, the house journal of the neo-conservative movement.

The PNAC aimed to cement for all time America's triumph in the Cold War, by increasing defence spending, challenging regimes that were hostile to US interests, and promoting freedom and democracy around the world. Its goal was "an international order friendly to our security, prosperity and values".

The war on Iraq, spuriously justified by the supposed threat posed by Saddam's WMD, was the test run of this theory. It was touted as a panacea for every ill of the Middle East. The road to Jerusalem, the neo-cons argued, led through Baghdad. And after Iraq, why not Syria, Iran and anyone else that stood in Washington's way? All that, Mr Fukuyama now acknowledges, has been a tragic conceit.

Like the Leninists of old, he writes, the neo-conservatives reckoned they could drive history forward with the right mixture of power and will. However, "Leninism was a tragedy in its Bolshevik version, and it has returned as farce when practiced by the United States."

But was it not Mr Fukuyama who claimed in his most celebrated work, *The End of History and the Last Man*, that the whole world was locked on a glide-path to liberal, free-market democracy? Yes indeed. But that book, he points out, argued that the process was gradual, and must unfold at its own pace.

But not only were the neo-cons too impatient. A second error was to believe that an all-powerful America would be trusted to exercise a "benevolent hegemony". A third was the gross overstatement of the post 9/11 threat posed by radical Islam, in order to justify the dubious doctrine of preventive war.

Finally, there was the blatant contradiction between the neo-cons' aversion to government meddling at home and their childlike faith in their ability to impose massive social engineering in foreign and utterly unfamiliar countries like Iraq. Thence sprang the mistakes of the occupation period.

Some, however, are resolutely unswayed. In the latest *Weekly Standard*, Mr Kristol accuses Mr Fukuyama of losing his nerve - of wanting to "retrench, hunker down and let large parts of the world go to hell in a handbasket, hoping the hand-basket won't blow up in our faces."

Christopher Hitchens, the one-time Trotskyist turned neo-con fellow traveller and eternal polemicist, derides Mr Fukuyama for "conceding to the fanatics and beheaders the claim that they are a response to American blunders and excesses," and for yearning for a return of Kissingerian realism in foreign affairs.

The fact, however, remains that future Bush policymakers who signed the PNAC nine years ago are now mostly gone. Paul Wolfowitz, the war's most relentless and starry-eyed promoter, has moved on to the World Bank, silent about the mess he did so much to create. Richard Perle, leader of the resident hawks department at the American Enterprise Institute think-tank here, has vanished from the scene. Lewis Libby meanwhile has stepped down as Vice-President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, to focus his energy on staying out of jail.

Yet another signatory was Zalmay Khalilzad, now the US ambassador to Iraq. This week even he - Afghan born and the one original neo-con who had the region in his blood - admitted that the invasion had opened "a Pandora's box" that could see the Iraq conflict spread across the entire Middle East.

Those left in the administration - primarily Mr Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, the Defence Secretary, are not so much neo-conservatives as "Hobbesian unilateralists", concerned to protect and advance US national interests in a lawless and violent world, whatever it takes.

As for Condoleezza Rice, never a signed-up member of the movement but mostly sympathetic to it when she was the President's security adviser - she has metamorphosed from hawk into pragmatist with her move from the White House to the State Department.

It is on George Bush's lips that neo-conservatism most obviously survives - in the commitment to spreading freedom and democracy that he proclaims almost daily, and most hubristically in his second inaugural in 2005 that promised to banish tyranny from the earth.

But even the extravagant oratory of that icy January day cannot obscure the irony of America's Iraq adventure. The application of a doctrine built upon the supposed boundlessness of US power has succeeded only in exposing its limits.

Thus chastened, Mr Fukuyama now wants to temper the idealism of the neo-conservative doctrine with an acceptance that some things are not so easy to change, and that the US must cut its cloth accordingly. He calls it "realistic Wilsonianism". A better description might be neo-realism. And if that brings a smile to the face of a certain former US high priest of realism with a pronounced German accent, who can blame him?

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